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A Peculiar Service

By JOHN LEONARD

THE NIGHT WATCH, 25 Years of Peculiar Service. By David Atlee Phillips. 309 pages. Atheneum. \$9.95.

In "Give Us This Day," E. Howard Hunt wrote: "I called on Knight, the propaganda chief, an officer who had worked for me brilliantly on the Guatemala Project. We greeted each other warmly and remarked that the old crowd was rallying to a new cause. Knight was a tall, almost theatrically handsome man who had spent most of his C.I.A. career on the outside, i.e. under cover. He spoke fluent Spanish and at one time had owned and edited a Spanish newspaper. For the three preceding years he had served under cover in Havana, and was well versed in current Cuban politics and personalities. Knight was imaginative, enthusiastic and a tireless worker."

Knight, in real life, is David Atlee Phillips. That "Guatemala Project" was the overthrow of the freely elected Arbenz Government in 1954. That "new cause" to which Mr. Hunt and Mr. Phillips rallied was the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1967. We are not reading a novel, so far. After the Bay of Pigs—which Mr. Phillips blames on President Dwight D. Eisenhower, for having postponed it until John F. Kennedy took over as President; on Dean Rusk, for persuading Mr. Kennedy to change the landing site; on Mr. Kennedy, for canceling the D-Day air attack; and on Gen. Charles B. Cabell, deputy director of Central Intelligence, for not calling the President to remonstrate—Mr. Phillips sat under a tree in his backyard off Massachusetts Avenue in Washington with a bottle of gin and a bottle of vermouth, and got drunk and sick.

If It Hadn't Been...

He could have been, instead, in Chile or Guatemala or Cuba, Lebanon, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Venezuela. In fact, he has been. And he might have gone on to "a major C.I.A. station, perhaps Paris or London," if it hadn't been for Seymour Hersh, Otis Pike, Victor Marchetti, Daniel Schorr, Frank Church, Philip Agee and all those other spoilsports who said terrible things about his employer. Instead, Mr. Phillips quit to start the Association of Retired Intelligence Officers, to lobby on television and in news magazines for his agency, and to write this book accounting for his 25 years of "peculiar service." (The phrase was Nathan Hale's.)

I must pause. Fifteen years ago, somewhere between Palo Alto and San Francisco, while I was on my way to burning out the clutch in an English Ford, William F. Buckley Jr. told me why the Bay of Pigs was a fiasco. His was the version according to Mr. Phillips. His informant had C.I.A. connections. I knew that Mr. Buckley, who is as talented as he says Tom Wolfe is, had served time with the C.I.A. in Mexico. I didn't know that he had served it with Howard Hunt. Then, eight years ago in these pages, I panned a spy novel by a pseudonymous St. John; it was full of Ivy League old-boyism. This St. John wrote a letter of witty complaint, which I discarded. I didn't know that St. John was Howard Hunt, that I was discarding a footnote to the history of huggemugger. Five years ago, at a benefit for the New York Public Library and in his newspaper column, Mr. Buckley made fun of me for being testy on Watergate. We aren't really fictional, any of us, I hope. Mr. Buckley is still a friend. But what novel are they stuck in?

Enough, Mr. Phillips, who once upon a time wanted to be an actor and a playwright, has written a diabolically clever book. He introduces himself as a nice guy who always voted for the Democrats, a patriotic roustabout who couldn't say no to just one more mission for so long that he ended up a GS-18 in charge of the Western Hemisphere. He introduces his agency as a bunch of fun-loving white hats who, on the whole, would have preferred retiring somewhere to raise rabbits if it weren't for this problem of Communist terrorists about whom they have to fill out so many tedious 3 by 5 cards. He deplores excess and assassination. When his conscience itches, he scratches. He is so sincere, so charming, that my teeth fell out.

The method of "The Night Watch" is to admit mistakes and light up a filter-tipped extenuation. Thus: the C.I.A. shouldn't mess around at home, and oughtn't to have tried to abolish Salvador Allende—or anybody else—abroad, but we mean well. The dramatic tension of "The Night Watch" is supplied by Richard Welch, one-eyed and puckish and off to Athens where he would die in 1975, probably because critics of the agency fingered him in print as an agent. This sickens me as much as it does Mr. Phillips. The style of "The Night Watch" is anecdotal, a bag of M&M's. The trouble with "The Night Watch" is that it is just as entertaining as Mr. Phillips wanted it to be. Alas, I couldn't put it down.

A Smog-Ball Phrase

—And I expect I would enjoy the company of Mr. Phillips, as I've probably enjoyed the company of a number of agents I didn't know were agents. But doesn't he see that back in 1954, when he bought a smog-ball phrase in the agency charter—"such other functions and duties as the National Security Council may, from time to time, direct"—he went around a crucial bend? Pretty much whatever the President wanted, or the agency thought the President wanted; or the agency believed the President would have wanted if he'd thought about it, the agency tried to do. What did getting rid of Mossadegh, Arbenz, Juan Bosch and Allende accomplish? Is the world any safer for I.T.&T.? Certainly it isn't any safer for Larry O'Brien or Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist. King Hussein, admittedly, prospers. So, on the other hand, does Fidel Castro.

Sorry, but for all its grace and jazziness of detail, "The Night Watch" winds down to saying, on behalf of its client, "Most of us are not a crook." And I'm not altogether sure whether, considering how well-done it is, it shouldn't be considered as one more example of the agency's meddling in our domestic affairs. Mr. Phillips, after all, spent 25 years specializing in propaganda.